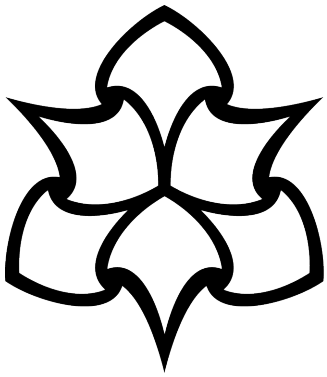

Vadivel's Body

Minoli Salgado

> *[A]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.* (U1:244)

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They say that during the war in Sri Lanka, the uncanny was to be found in ordinary things: a dull day at work, a secure home, a life lived without fear. Vadivel's story of the torture of his son returns us to the familiar strangeness of war; it brings hidden things to light. It is a matter of public record. The loose bones of facts have been duly ordered and arranged. Here: the body of evidence. Then last year, he brought his story to me. He, a secondary witness of his son's torture, made me a distant third. And in the absence of a common language, it was his body that talked.

Vadivel approaches me with a sheaf of papers and introduces me to his son, who appears as a bundle of newsprint. There is a smudged black and white photo of an awkwardly smiling teenager with brilliant eyes.

Here, an article about Sanjeevan, who was eighteen years old when he died.

Here, an affidavit that shows his appeal at the UN Court of Human Rights.

Here, Sanjeevan's autopsy report stating the cause of death was homicide.

Sanjeevan was Vadivel's oldest child. He went to Wesley High School, was involved in a lot of religious activities, adored his youngest sister, was precociously clever and especially good at Tamil and Maths.

'He was the kind of son I wished for. He fulfilled my ambitions with his studies. We got his exam results after he died.'

13 October 1998. Just another ordinary day of war. Vadivel and his wife were at home. Sanjeevan had gone to the temple after tuition, when a friend cycled up and asked him to join him on a visit to Kalmunai.

'My son refused to go but his friend insisted and my son finally went. On the way, there was a stop and search check by the army. They were doing a round-up, searching for the LTTE. They fired their guns into the sky to attract attention. My son tried to head back but was shot at. My son got caught and his friend died. They removed my son's shirt and tied his hands to a telegraph pole and beat him *so badly*. All the way to the police station my son was being beaten by them.'

Vadivel holds his hands around an imaginary pole, taking us into a space somewhere between his outstretched hands and those of his missing son. His eyes cloud over as he goes in search of his son. He heard someone had been shot and killed. It was dark.

'We were even scared to go to hospital. It was almost 8 pm. I went to the hospital but I was not allowed to see the body. I spent all night searching for the body.'

Is it a boy or a body he is looking for? Vadivel is not sure.

The next day policemen told him his son had been arrested.

'I was shocked. I went to the police station and begged to see him but was not allowed. All the time, I feared. I was afraid to even imagine what might have happened to him. Only after I spoke to a lawyer, was I allowed to see my son. When they brought him from his cell, I saw that he couldn't walk.'

Sanjeevan was limping, his body swollen and disfigured with cuts. He asked for something to drink. *Soda water*.

He pleaded with his father, saying he did not know why he was there.

'There were bruises all over his body. He was saying he was very afraid and asked me to save him.'

And yes, he had been tortured by the police.

The drink was brought. Vadivel then noticed his son's fingernails had been removed.

'He couldn't swallow juice. He couldn't swallow! He couldn't stand or sit. This is how much they tortured my son. Can you imagine how I feel? Without sitting. Without standing. Without nails.'

Vadivel's anguish lifts him. Shatters sight. The boy he sees in bits.

He saw his son for almost half an hour. The next day, he heard that his son had been taken to hospital and then been returned to his cell, that he was feeling a bit better after medical attention. He then received two calls, giving contradictory facts. His narrative gets muddled as he tries to remember the sequence of events.

He remembers being told to go to the police station but that he had no transport to get there – keeps repeating this – then remembers the call from someone at the hospital that changed everything.

'They are lying to you. Your son is not alive. His condition was critical. He was taken to hospital and died. The police are only calling you to get you to pick up his body. Get prepared for *that*.'

The news of his death sinks into a cry of despair.

Everyone was crying. He did not know what to do. He couldn't pick up the body that night. There was no transport. The next day he went to the Red Cross, hired a lorry, bought a coffin and new clothes for his son. New clothes for his boy but there is a body to bring home.

'Only the driver and I went to bring the body home.'

He keeps speaking of a body – giving details of his search for another's body before speaking of the body of his son. He was like this, he said, like this; raising a hand, clutching his neck, stooping - looking directly at me to be sure I understand the unbearable, unspeakable breaking of his child.

I see, I keep saying. I see.

But what I see is not what he sees.

I see a man maimed by an understanding that leaves me on a different shore.

When Vadivel went to retrieve his son's body he was mocked and threatened by police.

'I bent my head and remained silent because my purpose was to clear the body and take it without a problem. Even though I could slightly understand their language, I remained silent.'

When he entered the morgue, his son was lying under a white shroud.

He lifted the cloth and saw his son's chest had been sliced open to the stomach. 'Here and there it was cut. It was in a pathetic condition.'

What was the cause of death given by the police?

But Vadivel ignores me and gives an answer to a question I did not ask.

Why do you want the body? the police asked. You can't take it with you. If you want to do funeral rites, you must do them here.

'I told them I brought a lorry with all the necessary things so that I could bring his body home. I want his body. *I need to do these rites*. I was thinking about my son. I couldn't even think about the sadness that was deep in my heart. I feared. I was terrified. I wondered if they could do that to him, what will the police do *next*?'

Somewhere between the boy and the body lies a vast historical fear. If the body returns home it might resurrect the boy.

They also said that if he wanted to take the body, he would have to pay for all expenses and they would not issue a pass. Sanjeevan's body was brought home without authorisation. During this journey it did not officially exist.

But he was home. His boy was back. The next day they did the funeral rites and buried his son.

But the burial meant concealment, hid the crime. Sanjeevan's body would need to be exhumed to prove he was tortured. When the remains were disinterred, the police tried to cover up the earth.

Don’t touch! Vadivel said. He’ll be back. Stop covering the earth up!

These were skeletal remains. Vadivel sees them and remembers. Dare he say it? That the body was left exposed by the hospital that night. When he returned the next day, he saw a carrion crow upon a tree. The bird swept down and took some of his son’s remains in its beak. Flew away.

‘Seeing *this* was the worst thing in my life.’

The coordinator interrupts to streamline the story into a case of human rights abuse. There were two postmortems, he says. The first stated that Sanjeevan had been killed by a single gunshot wound by an unknown assailant. The second, which took place after the exhumation, said he had been shot at close range and had six injuries, including a broken shoulder, as a result of beatings with a blunt instrument.

It also contained a detail that Vadivel cannot or will not say. He’s omitted - cannot speak - it, for it is deep inside him with the body of his boy. Sanjeevan had been cut, something was missing. The report, the coordinator adds, revealed that Sanjeevan’s tongue had been removed.

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Acknowledgement

This paper is the product of a research trip conducted in Sri Lanka in 2018 for a project on witness literature funded by a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust.